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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000016

SIPDIS

GENEVA FOR RMA

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TAGS: PREL PHUM PREF MOPS MARR BM TH  
SUBJECT: KAREN STATE UPDATE

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)  
Summary and Comment

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¶1. (C) According to the Karen National Union (KNU), which continues its armed struggle against Burma's military regime, it has agreed on the terms of a defensive military alliance with two other armed groups - the Kachin Independence Army (KIA-a ceasefire group) and Chin National Army. Talks aimed at expanding the pact to include other groups are on-going. We can also confirm that a DRL-funded health clinic in Karen State was entirely burned down in a recent attack. According to our contacts, attacks during January and February have displaced 4,000 Karen, who are now in hiding on the Burma side of the border. Unlike past years, our contacts have not observed any large-scale Burma Army troop movements in Karen State. They attribute this to what they claim is a focus within the Burmese regime and military on planning for the upcoming elections. End Summary and Comment.

Defensive Alliance Agreed

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¶2. (C) According to the KNU's head of intelligence Isaac Po, who recently traveled to China with other ethnic leaders, the KNU, KIA, and CNA have agreed on the terms of a defensive military alliance. Po stated the alliance is not designed to be offensive in nature, but he did not rule out the possibility of the groups working together against Burma Army targets. He also hinted that the alliance could lead to broader political cooperation, though not in the very short term. According to Po, KIA leaders he met in China told him the Army has 20,000 troops adequately armed (Embassy Rangoon notes KIA strength is usually estimated around 6,000 troops.) , and could recruit an additional 10,000 if necessary.

¶3. (C) Po told us he also travelled to Shan state to meet with leaders of armed groups. He said many of them discussed the possibility of joining the alliance among the KNU, CNA and KIA during Shan National Day celebrations February 4-6, but did not

reach an agreement. Po said he hopes to hold more talks with the Shan about this on an as yet unspecified date.

What's Going on in Karen State?

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¶4. (SBU) Separately, we spoke to Free Burma Rangers (FBR) contacts, who told us that attacks in January and February by the Burma Army and DKBA (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army - a KNU splinter group allied with the Burma Army) have resulted in 4,000 IDPs, all of whom remain in hiding on the Burma side of the border. The attacks are taking place in northeast Nyanglabin District, according to FBR. FBR also told us that TBBC (The Thailand-Burma Border Consortium), COERR (Catholic Organization for Emergency Relief and Reconstruction), and Partners (A Chiang Mai-based NGO) were providing relief to the IDPs.

¶5. (SBU) FBR also confirmed that a health clinic in Karen State was entirely burned down on February 8. (Note: We understand the clinic received funding from DRL.) An FBR team at the site reported that the clinic in question was co-located with the headquarters of a KNLA battalion. The attacking troops found and seized a stash of medicine medics had succeeded in removing from the clinic before it was destroyed, according to FBR. No casualties were reported at the clinic as a result of the attack, but the clinic's staff and the FBR medics working with them report a shortage of medicine and other supplies. (Note: Embassy Rangoon learned from Alan Saw U, coordinator of the Karen Development Network, that the attack appeared to be in retaliation for a surprise "hit-and-run" attack by the KNU on BA

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troops that had occurred a few days earlier. Following the KNU-initiated attack, the BA mobilized approximately 200 troops and looked for the KNU troops. Alan Saw U reported that when the BA troops could not find the KNU troops, they attacked the easiest target they could find, which happened to be the mobile health clinic. End note.)

¶6. (SBU) According to both the KNU and FBR, the Burma Army has not executed any large-scale troop movements during this dry season - a break with past practice. Nonetheless, small-scale attacks, pillaging and burning continue, particularly in Nyanglabin District, they assert. According to FBR, the Burma Army is now delegating attacks in certain areas entirely to the DKBA, and is employing the same tactic in parts of Shan State. In one incident on February 17, the DKBA crossed the Thai border and killed a Thai citizen of Karen dissent in Nong BUa village, Tha Song Yang district, allegedly over a business dispute, according to FBR. The commander of the local army ranger unit confirmed the murder to Embassy Bangkok, and stated that the three DKBA soldiers involved fled across the border.

¶7. (C) FBR also reports that the KNLA's Third Brigade is increasingly exercising control over the gold trade in its area of operation. FBR contacts opined that the KNLA is using the proceeds to purchase weapons in Thailand, but could not confirm this. FBR also reported that approximately 200 fighters have defected from the KNU/KNLA Peace Council (a ceasefire group) back to the KNLA over the past three months.

¶8. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Bangkok and

Rangoon.  
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